

Girls blab on and boys shout them down: Gender differences in small-group discussion

Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a small scale study that explored gendered differences in secondary students' use of the linguistic space in teacher facilitated small-group discussions. The research was undertaken in response to secondary teachers suggesting that the findings of a study in primary school settings (Godinho & Shrimpton, 2003), which claimed that boys dominated the linguistic space, would not hold true in secondary school settings. An initial quantitative analysis of the small-group discussion data gathered in secondary schools affirmed that overall, the girls were slightly more vocal than the boys. Yet when interviewed, girls asserted that they were marginalized in discussions by boys' vocal domination, their exclusionary gender loyalty practices, and their attention seeking, 'showmanship' behaviour — issues that had not emerged in the primary school study. Subsequently an adapted form of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 1999; Luke, 1995) was applied to the data to examine more closely students and teachers' discourses, and to interpret how these impacted on dialogic processes. The findings of the study in secondary schools revealed that in classes where there was a strong focus on a community of inquiry approach to learning there was a more respectful and productive use of the linguistic space. In these groups, the interconnectedness of students' social capital, their acquired discussions skills and the enabling talk strategies adopted by teachers supported students to use language in ways which were powerfully literate.

Introduction

Our interest in gendered differences in students' use of linguistic space was a response to the much publicised concern about the widening literacy achievement gap between boys and girls. Of particular interest was the claim that girls are perceived to be at a distinct advantage over boys with regard to verbal reasoning because their social lives are more likely to revolve around verbal discussion and communication (Cresswell *et al.*, 2002). This claim inferred that girls possessed the linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) which would give them the edge in the achievement of literacy outcomes. In this paper we examine the data from our study in secondary schools to address secondary teachers' anecdotal claim that the findings from an earlier study of boys' domination in small-group discussion does not transfer to secondary settings.

Given the importance of verbal discussion and communication across the curricula, we sought to investigate gendered differences in students' use of linguistic space through a

study of secondary students' participation in small-group teacher facilitated discussions. The decision to situate the study in the context of small-group, teacher facilitated discussions was based on the opportunities these create for students to: refine their discussion skills (Abbott & Godinho, 2001; Godinho 2001, Clements & Godinho, 2003); develop a foundation for ongoing dialogue (Ritchhart, 2002); experience the benefits of becoming a learning community (Roghoff, Matusov & White, 1996; Wenger, 1998); and provide the necessary space for extended student responses that make students' thinking more visible (Perkins, 2003). Teacher facilitation of the groups supported our connectedness with the social constructivist paradigm that views students as active learners, who are scaffolded by teachers in the process of working collaboratively to construct meaning (Westgate & Corden, 1993; Wegerif & Mercer, 1996). The small-group construct best lends itself to the learning community approach in which all participants are expected to play an active role, no one assuming all the responsibility and no one being passive. In a whole class discussion, it is generally impossible to ensure all students engage actively, and the opportunities for teachers to extend and deepen a student's thinking are compromised by the need to give as many students as possible a chance to participate.

In this paper we argue the importance of the teacher's commitment to provide a challenging learning environment that encourages students to use language in ways which are powerfully literate <<http://www.stella.org.au>>, and to be sensitized to the inherent tensions and imbalances that gendered discourses can create. This has emerged as a key finding in our studies of small-group teacher facilitated learning in both primary and secondary school settings (Godinho & Shrimpton, 2003). It is the teachers' awareness of the linguistic capital students bring to the discussion, their monitoring and mediating of students' linguistic exchanges (Bourdieu, 1991), and their awareness of how power relations (Reay, 1999; Apple, 2006) operate within and beyond the small-group discussion context that have particular significance in the development of small-group learning communities. Snapshots of the quantitative analysis of the data are used to reveal emergent patterns in the students' linguistic use of space, followed by a discussion of

insights that emanated from an analysis of the discourses enacted by students and teachers, and their impact on the dialogic processes.

Situating the study

Research on gender-based differences in student talk is somewhat limited, with studies often more focussed on aspects of quality discussion (Dillon 1990, 1994; Bridges, 1988; Edwards & Westgate, 1994; Godinho, 2001). Yet, as early as the 1980s, Spender's research claimed that by school age children 'bring to the classroom the [gendered] understanding that it is males who should have the floor and females who should be the dutiful listeners' (1980, p. 149). Research in the 1980s claimed that teachers were unaware that girls occupied less linguistic space in discussions (Spender, 1982; French & French, 1984; Sadker & Sadker, 1985). Swann and Graddol (1988) in their studies found that boys, girls and teachers collude to allow boys more talk-turns and talk time. Studies in the 1990s affirmed that girls are considered better at collaborative small-group talk where interpersonal skills are valued (Jenkins & Cheshire, 1990; Reay, 1991; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Of particular interest to this study is Judith Baxter's finding of girls' adopting an 'affiliative, cooperative talk "style" of talk compared to boys' competitive, adversarial "style" (1999, p. 87), and her affirmation of Swann and Graddol's (1995) assertion of boys' failure to endorse ideas introduced or developed by girls, suggesting that female subservience assists in reproducing male-female power relationships. The girls in Baxter's study conformed to expectations of classroom discourse protocols, whereas the boys flaunted 'the rules' to seize the floor.

Just as literacy outcomes cannot be generalized in terms of gender-based achievement (Alloway *et al.*, 2002; Hill *et al.*, 2002; Rowan *et al.* 2002, Teese *et al.*, 1995), neither should students' talk patterns be viewed as a male-female dichotomy. Social and cultural capital always need to be taken into consideration as patterns of student participation and performance are aggravated or moderated by socio-economic status (Teese *et al.*, 1995) — factors taken into consideration in the student achievement data produced by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Despite PISA data revealing that Australian students' performance in literacy ranks among the best in the world, there is widespread public concern about boys underperforming in relation to girls

with regard to national literacy benchmarks (Cresswell *et al.*, 2002). In more recent examinations of benchmark data, the boys who are underachieving are located in the tail, which some researchers are claiming is a case of ‘the tail wagging the dog’, and leading to what some educators and researchers perceive as an unrealistic perception of boys’ underachieving across the spectrum (Cuttance *et al.*, 2006). There are also claims of the feminization of curriculum — a result of educational policies of the 1970s–1990s that sought to redress girls’ disadvantage, and a current outcry that the pendulum has now swung too far the other way. Weaver-Hightower (2003) provides a comprehensive view of the literature on what has popularly become known as ‘the boys’ turn’ in the education research agenda. Concern for boys’ disengagement with schooling and their underachievement in meeting literacy benchmarks has resulted in 30 million dollars of capital investment by the Commonwealth government funding for school-based projects that target these issues (Godinho *et al.*, 2006).

It is, however, an interest in the concept of students’ linguistic capital that led us to look more closely at what Bourdieu (1991) describes as ‘linguistic exchanges’, a relation of communication between a sender and receiver, in small-group teacher facilitated discussions. While the relation of power that is understood ‘both as their [speakers] capacity for production and as their capacity for appropriation and appreciation’ (p.67) is of interest, so too is the social structure present in teacher-student and student-student interactions which are indicated by enacted discourses. Gee (2005) refers to ‘big D discourses’ more generically as ‘walking the walk and talking the talk’ and more specifically as ‘ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting and interacting ... (associations that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network” ’ (2005, p. 26). As Foucault (1972, p. 49) maintains, discourses ‘systematically form the objects about which they speak’, and create knowledge-power relations by their construction of truths about the social and natural world.

Our approach to the discourse analysis of the data featured in this paper has been influenced by the work of Gee (1999) Luke (1995) and Fairclough (2001), who support Foucault’s (1972) assertion that power is constituted through discourses, and is important in the construction of knowledge and what counts as knowledge. As Gee maintains

(1999, p. 5) ‘no set of research tools and no theory belongs to a single person’. This claim fits within the feminist post-structuralist perspective (Weedon 1987; Davies 1993, 1997; Allard, 2004) that acknowledges the importance of language as a discursive practice, and foregrounds its involvement in social relations of power, domination and ideology (Fairclough, 2001).

The research process

A cross section of co-educational schools was targeted to seek student representation across a range of socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The three major school categories were included: government, Catholic and independent schools. Table 1 provides a brief description of the school settings.

Government School (1)	Traditional inner suburban school. Strong multi-cultural representation. Socio-economic status (SES) of students’ families lower to middle range.
Government School (2)	Eastern suburban school. Strong multi-cultural student representation. SES middle to higher range.
Catholic School	Secondary regional college west of Melbourne. Strong multi-cultural representation. SES lower range.
Independent School (1)	Large inner suburban school. SES upper middle to higher range.

Table 1 Schools participating in the study

Participants

Twelve secondary school teachers in Years 7-10 were recruited. Given the predominance of females in the teaching profession, gender balance of teachers was not possible.

Although we sought to include several males, ultimately only two agreed to participate.

The teachers were at different career stages, ranging from recent graduates in their early twenties, to those in their mid-fifties with many years of teaching experience.

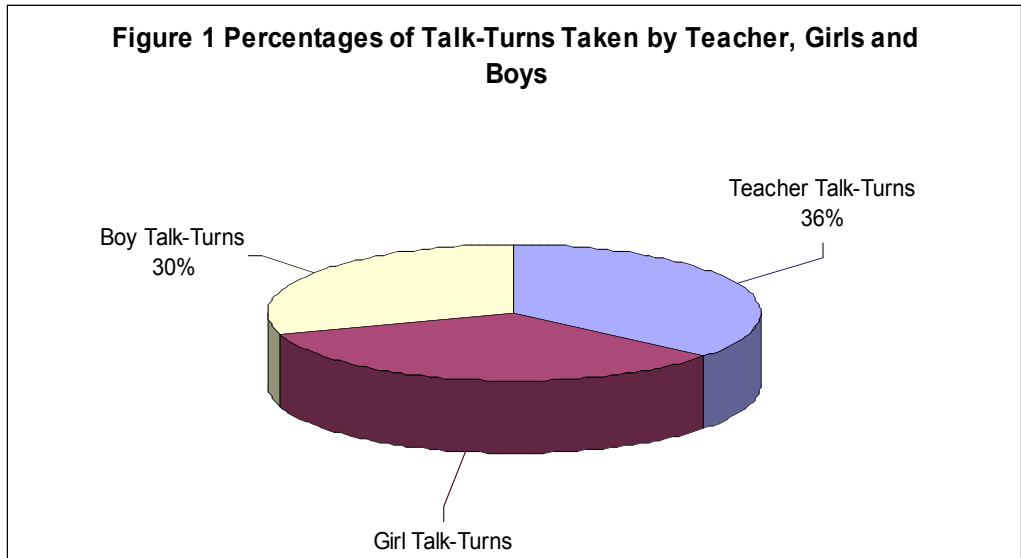
Approximately 80 secondary students were selected by their teachers to participate in the small-group discussions. Teachers were asked to ensure their groupings were heterogeneous and to take student dynamics into consideration. They were also requested to be mindful that the cultural diversity of the students was reflective of their school population. The groups were predominantly drawn from English classes but a group from Performing Arts, Visual Arts and Humanities class were included.

Videotaping

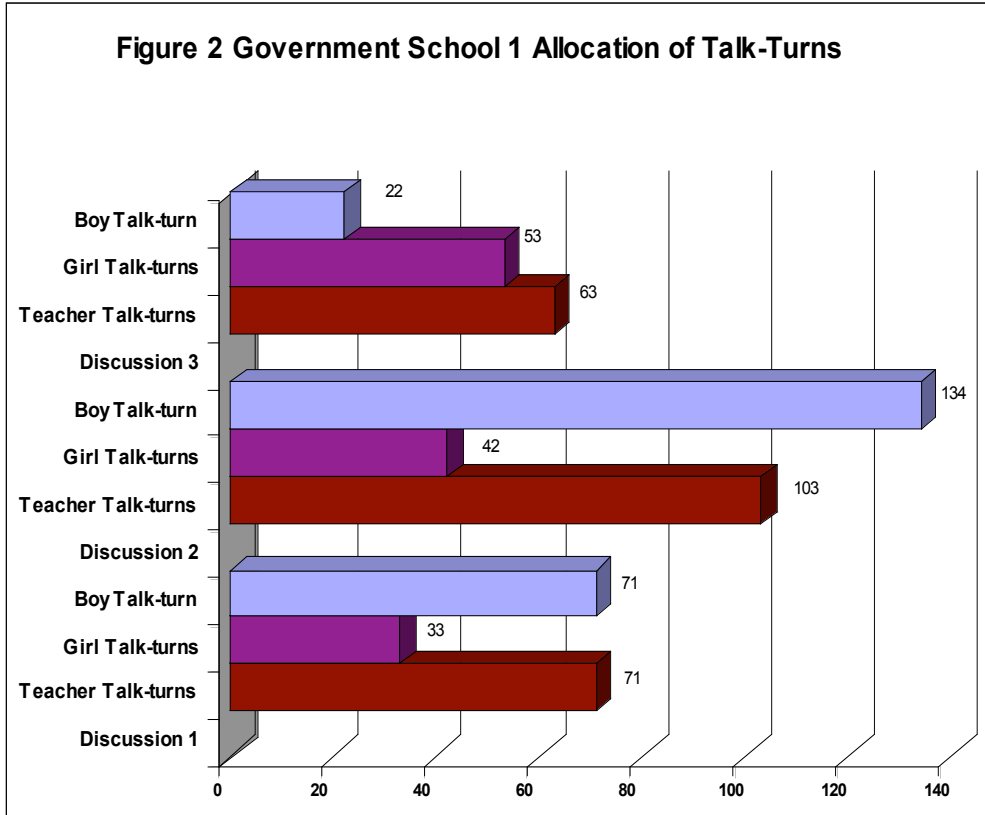
The teacher facilitated small-group discussion (20-30 minutes), the follow up semi-structured interviews with the teacher (15 minutes), and the follow up semi-structured interviews with the student group (20 minutes) were videotaped. Videotaping ensured a highly accurate documentation of what was said and made visible the subtle non-verbal interactions within the discussions. This data collection method resolved the difficulties of successfully distinguishing between the tonally similar voices of some boys and girls, which can occur when relying solely on audio recordings. Two cameras were used for filming discussions and the interviews. This approach enabled an overview of the group interaction, in addition to close-up shots of individual students. While this was not a natural situation, we believe the impact on the discussion, in most instances, was minimal. This can be attributed to the equipment being limited to two cameras and one set of lights (used only when required). During the course of the filming, the two camera operators and the researcher were positioned well back from the group. Before the taping commenced, students were familiarized with the equipment and the video-recording process. We have found this approach essential for helping students adjust to the intrusion of additional people and equipment into their discussion space.

A quantitative snapshot

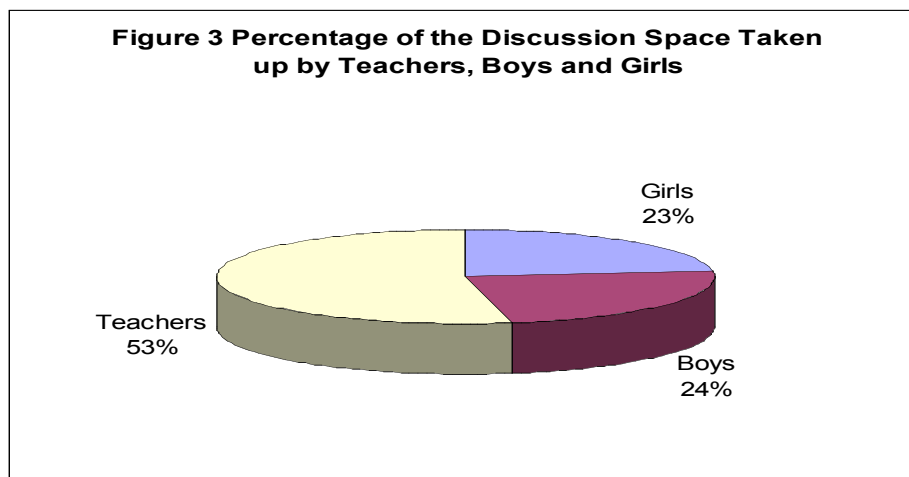
The findings of the quantitative analysis of the talk-turns taken by teachers, girls and boys of how discussion space was taken up affirms the secondary teachers' claim that girls in their schools are more vocal than the girls in the primary school study. A talk-turn in this study is defined as a moment in time when a student holds the attention of the group, albeit in some instances very briefly. In some instances a talk-turn is simply a word or a phrase that has little impact on the dialectical construction of meaning. However, when data from all discussion groups were combined, the girls had just four per cent more talk-turns than the boys, as shown in Figure 1—a very marginal difference.



This percentages of talk-turns taken by secondary students are, however, somewhat misleading as they do not reveal the large disparity in talk-turns taken by boys and girls within some discussions. A significant difference between the findings of the primary study and the secondary study, was this noticeable variation across groups in take up of the linguistic space by boys and girls in the secondary schools, compared with the boys' consistent domination of linguistic space across schools and groups in the primary schools (see Godinho & Shrimpton, 2003). Figure 2 exemplifies this variation, revealing that the boys in group two of government school 1 overwhelmingly dominated the talk-turns with a ratio of approximately 3:1, whereas in discussion three the ratio was 2.5 in the girls' favour. Surprisingly, when the space taken up by teachers, boys and girls was calculated on a word count basis, there was only a one per cent variance between boys and girls and this was in the boys' favour as Figure 3 reveals; whereas in the primary school study, boys took up 18% more of the linguistic space than the girls. Hence secondary teachers' anecdotal claim that girls take over the talk, may apply in some specific contexts but is not a generalizable across the secondary groups participating in this study.



Of particular interest, however, is the finding revealed in Figure 3 that secondary teachers take approximately one in every three talk-turns, which suggests a teacher-centric discourse is operational across the groups. This finding also suggests a reluctance on teachers' behalf to 'vacate the floor' (Perrott, 1988), so that students can respond to and build on one another's responses. Effectively, such domination of the talk-turns infers that few opportunities exist for students to engage in dialogic talk.



Associated with a teacher-centric discourse are *cognitive take-overs* (Edwards & Westgate 1994), when teachers take over the thinking of the students, or *expert talk* (Baker & Freebody 1989; Freebody 1995) where teachers likewise provide lengthy explanations based on their own ideas or opinions — practices that subvert student engagement in the discussion. The prevalence of teacher talk-turns suggests that opportunities for students to engage with practices that constitute a discussion, such as reflectiveness, responsiveness to others' ideas, engagement with a diversity of ideas, risk taking and flexible thinking (see Bridges, 1988; Godinho & Shrimpton, 2003), are minimized in the majority of the discussions. However, close analysis of the teacher and student discourses that are operational within and across the groups are needed before this conjecture can be affirmed.

The findings presented in Figures 1-3 are simply a snapshot and provide very little insight into the student perception of the domination of linguistic space by boys and the silencing of girls, which are widely claimed by students in the interviews that followed their group discussions.

The guys sometimes get a bit rowdy. They talk louder than girls and always get their word in. (Year 8 girl)

Well, it depends on the subject, but maybe boys most of the time. (Year 7 girl)

Most of the time it's boys, but sometimes it's girls if they're confident...(Year 7 girl)

It tends to be the boys. They are really loud in our grade. (Year 8 girl)

Boys, I'd say, because it's a lot easier... obviously boys have deeper voices than the girls, so it's easier to hear us then. (Year 8 boy)

Boys do dominate, but there are a few odd girls that tend to stand up and really give it a go. (Year 9 boy)

Male dominance in the classroom and in the school is high and everywhere. They just tend to be louder and have more to say than the girls. The girls just tend to calm down after a while and the boys take it further. (Year 9 boy)

Boys dominate, definitely, 'cause in today's society, you wouldn't see girls dominate in speech and protest and all that stuff. (Year 7 boy)

These claims may be suggestive of the students' adoption of a public discourse that views females as professionally, economically, politically and socially disadvantaged, and which they have applied to the school context and the way in which discussion is enacted in their classrooms. The analyses of student and teacher discourses provide

opportunities to probe and explore in more nuanced ways the reality of students' claims of the boys' more powerful positioning in a discussion context and the silencing of girls.

Girls blab on ... myth or reality?

The notion of girls out-talking the boys —‘blabbing on’— was oppositional to the girls' claims of being ‘silenced’— ‘shouted down’. In exploring this discrepancy, a finding that emerged was that while girls may wait longer to find a space to enter the discussion, when they do so they often speak for extended periods of time, a finding consistent with Baxter's study (1999, 2002). Despite female secondary students' voicing of a public discourse of social disadvantage in their interviews, in the discussions they frequently took up the linguistic space and in many instances provided more elaborated and detailed responses than the boys. This example from a Year 9 art discussion in an inner suburban independent school using Ron Richhart's (2002) notion of looking out (creative thinking) and looking in (reflective thinking) demonstrates their more productive up take of the linguistic space than the boys.

- Boy: I guess I just brainstorm like the different ways inside-outside can be interpreted, like, as if there were trees inside and windows looking outside, and then it's just different kinds of thinking about it... It's just inside a person and outside...how they express themselves.
- Teacher: OK. And the different ways of thinking...how did you do? Can you explain that?
- Boy: Uh...I don't know...You just keep on thinking about the idea and then just write down the different ways you can look at the topic.
- Teacher: Terrific! What have you done, <Girl 3's name>?
- Girl: I first thought of a person outside in the cold looking in and people doing something like Christmas, enjoying themselves but the person outside is freezing cold, not enjoying themselves nor having a very good life. Then I thought forward a little bit more. I looked on the Internet and I found sketches of hands that show the muscles and the blood vessels so I was thinking about inside our hands. But then I continued with my window idea about looking out to something but also looking inside at the same time. So I created this room where there's a window looking out onto this night sky with the moon shining and the storm going on. You could see the wind blowing the trees and all the branches there. And on the inside it's all peaceful, and there's a drawer just below the window and one of the draws is open and you can see all these different things inside like clothes, personal items, a cat and you can just see what the owner's life is like.

This insightful description of how one girl engaged with creative and reflective thinking to determine the subject matter and its framing within her painting, is a remarkable juxtaposition with the boy's very limited description of his thinking processes and how

they informed his painting. Despite the teacher's probe, the boy's response about his thinking processes remains closed and no visual image can be formed of what his painting depicts. Conversely, the girl requires no prompting to provide an elaborated and detailed account of how the images for her painting emerged – a gendered pattern of presentation that continued as the students in this group attempted to make visible the thinking behind their paintings. This intrapersonal, reflective discourse may have been more appealing to the girls in the group; hence their confidence and assertiveness.

Girls were often more prepared to flesh out a point and develop their argument than the boys, giving some credibility to secondary teachers' claims that it is the girls who do the talking. Of course, interest levels in the topic of discussion can influence student levels of participation, but in the following excerpt the students have initiated the questions around a topic of shared interest relating to the question: What is morality??

- Boy 2: Yeah, I think it's pretty difficult to get everyone to agree on just one concept of right and wrong. 'Cause like, you've got people who say that killing is wrong and yet America just bombed hundreds of innocent Iraqis just to kill out this one guy. And...yeah.
- Teacher: So decisions made on national level can be quite different to individual?
- Boy 2: Yeah.
- Teacher: OK. <Boy 1's name>, is there anything that you thought that was interesting or really challenging?
- Boy 1: Ah, not really.
- Teacher: Not really? All heard before?
- Boy 1: Yeah.
- Teacher: <Girl 1's name>?
- Girl 1: I think it's really hard because...even with basic laws, the things we think of as wrong to do like killing, stealing, cheating, lying...but there are exceptions to them like white lies, self-defence, stealing so you can survive, so it makes it all more complicated.
- Teacher: Yeah. Excellent point! Thank you. <Girl 4's name>?
- Girl 4: I think it gets more confusing when you go through each point because everyone has a different opinion and it's really hard not to get confused between morality and the law because there's so much involved between them.
- Teacher: Yeah, I agree with that. <Girl 3's name>?
- Girl 3: Um, I think...there's not much left [to say], but I think it's important that we don't do things that are wrong all the time but we don't always have to do what's right. But I don't think we'll ever... Maybe one day but it will take a lot of discussions just to have one point of view that everyone's happy with.

Even in these final minutes of this discussion, the three girls sustain their responsiveness to the teacher's questioning and their linguistic exchanges demonstrate a collaborative and an affiliative engagement with one another's ideas. The boys, however, bow out of

the discussion despite the teacher's attempts to have them summarise interesting or challenging issues that have emerged for them, and despite Boy 2 introducing a new point with serious implications for what constitutes moral behaviour with regard to governance. Perhaps, the girls' persistence relates to their social lives being more likely to revolve around verbal discussion and communication (Cresswell *et al.*, 2002) and feeling a need in this instance to be responsive and supportive of the teacher.

Shouting them down

Whilst not consistent across discussion groups, there was cogent evidence in some discussions that supported girls' claims that they were 'shouted down'. Some boys' enacted an authoritative, 'knowing other' discourse that verged at times on being competitive and adversarial (Baxter, 1999, p. 87) and sometimes took the form of showmanship and attention seeking behaviors. The presence of 'showmanship' was clearly affirmed and was unequivocally identified as a discursive feature of the social practices that some boys enacted in the video-taped discussions, yet not in the interviews that followed.

While many girls were confident and assertive, even humorous at times, at no point did they engage in the deliberate attention-seeking behaviour of some boys who disrupted the discussion flow and the development of emergent ideas. The teachers were, overall, accepting of these behaviours – perhaps a case of 'tactical ignoring'. Baxter (2002) has suggested that males are often constructed as the wittier sex and girls (and perhaps teachers too) are constituted as the approving audience. In the following excerpt, the students are discussing what essential provisions (20 in all) will be taken by a scientist in a mission to protect an endangered species. These provisions must be air freighted in a small 'bin' to a remote island location.

- Boy 3: Well, if you've got solar power, like you should bring a solar panel or something like that, so you can charge everything.
- Girl 3: But that little bin is gonna end up under water if you carry a massive satellite dish.
- Boy 3: Satellite phone isn't like that. Satellite phone... <Noisy arguing>
- Teacher: One at a time, guys!
- Girl 3: It occupies space. She doesn't have much space in that little bin.
- Boy 3: I'm sure she could put it here. <circles something on his paper>
- Boy 1: Satellite phone is about the same size as that <pulls his mobile phone out and shows it to everyone> but just a bit bigger. <Group smile and laugh>.

Teacher: I didn't see that!
 Boy 1: It's not here.
 Teacher: I'm pleased to hear that it's not actually here!
 Boy 1: *It disappeared.*
 Girl 3 <giggling>: Well done, <Boy 1's name>. (Government School 2, Discussion 3)

In this group discussion rules are deliberately broken, and waived, albeit given a somewhat difficult situation with the filming of the group discussion. Girl 3 is arguing rationally on the basis of her understanding of a satellite dish and/or a solar panel, yet there is no attempt by the teacher to support her argument or to assist in developing it further. However, Girl 3 is very aware of Boy 1's intention to sabotage her argument and divert attention from it by producing his mobile phone, as the sarcastic tone her final comment indicates. The rather awkward giggling, is acknowledgement of the boy's use of humour and an acceptance of the 'boys will be boys' discourse which is operational here. The bemused expression on the teacher's face is also suggestive that she accepts the bravado, humour and risky behaviour as simply 'boys will be boys'.

'Technology expertise' was another discursive way of situating oneself as a male within the discussion. Technology expertise was considered a 'boys' thing' which constructed boys as the knowing 'other' and privileged them within the discussion as this discussion of an EPIRB (Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon) initiated by a boy reveal.

Boy 4: With the EPIRB thing, if you're lost and set it to work and like, the coast guards will come and get you so I think that's the best option. And the batteries last for 4 years. That's another thing.
 Teacher: Well, there we go, so that's...
 Boy 4: That's no hassle.
 Teacher: OK.
 Boy 3: What does it use?
 Boy 4: EPIRB batteries.
 Teacher: So we're taking what?
 Boy 4: An EPIRB.
 Teacher: We can take one of those or what?
 Girl 3: I think it's a pretty good idea, as long as the batteries last long.
 Boy 1: The battery is that big, like a car battery.
 Teacher: What is it again?
 Boy 4: EPIRB.
 Teacher: I've never heard of it, so I've learnt something. Thank you, <Boy 3's name>.
 Boy 4: No worries.
 Teacher: That's it. Now, what sort of cooking things will you need, guys? (Government School 2, Discussion 3)

No one questions the boys' knowledge about this technology, or asks for some explanation about how the signals from the EPIRB are picked up. Perhaps this is because the girls have constructed the boys as more authoritative on technology, considering this a 'boys' thing', or perhaps choosing silence as a way of more quickly diverting the discussion from a topic which they clearly know less about than the boys. Girl 3 is supportive of the idea, but does qualify her support by indicating concern about the longevity of the batteries, which Boy 4 inaccurately describes as big as a car battery. Boy 4's discursive positioning has empowered him as the teacher affirms when she claims that she has learnt something from him – her approval clearly 'chuffing' the boy, as evidenced in his facial expression and body posturing which attest to his feeling of power. The video captures him leaning back, arms crossed, legs outstretched with a highly satisfied look on his face. This male hegemonic discourse resonates with what Apple describes as 'ways of understanding and acting on the world that act as forms of cultural capital that can be and are employed to protect and enhance one's status in a social field' (2003, p. 11).

The shift of focus in the final line to 'cooking things', suggests that the teacher is eager to disengage from the boy's technological discourse and switch to a topic that will be more familiar to herself and the girls. This discourse is suggestive of what Blair (2000) has termed a '*genderlect*' of boy talk – an en-gendered school discourse pattern with the students in this group. This selected excerpt illustrates Reay's (1999, p.161) argument that not only is linguistic capital an integral part of cultural capital, but that the confidence and assertiveness of the speaker 'counts as much as the words an individual uses'.

As the girls in the interviews state, shouting them down also took other more discrete or symbolic forms of enactment such as gender loyalty where boys simply kept the linguistic exchanges among themselves as this example shows.

- Teacher: So are we saying that Mr Keating wants the boys to become free thinkers and independent individuals?
- Boy 2: He wants to let them **know** that they can become free thinkers and individuals.
- Girl 2: Um...*know*...
- Teacher: Um, that's good.
- Boy 1: Well, maybe he said that because he actually attended this school, maybe his experience at school...He didn't want the boys to make the same choice that he did.

Teacher: Yeah, but where did the Dead Poets Society come from?
 Boy 4: Mr Keating, because he went to the school and made the society.
 Boy 1: That's what I'm saying. He knows what it's like to be at the school and how you have to conform to your parents, the teachers, the school policies and everything, so he wants to teach the boys that they don't have to...
 Boy 5: He teaches them to think for themselves and there might be consequences to doing things that might be not as accepted as other things are.
 Teacher: What do you mean?
 Boy 5: Like, um, the school was against the Dead Poets' Society. They went along with that and they accepted the consequences by getting into trouble at the end.
 Teacher: Does anyone agree, disagree, think something different?
 Boy 2: I think we're on the same track.
 Teacher: We're on the same track. So let's get back to the Cameron's character. Is he the one exception to Mr Keating's teachings? He's the one that possibly doesn't have any... Mr Keating doesn't have any great influence on him. He hasn't kind of learnt the lesson. Is that what you're saying?
 Boy 2: I think so.
 Boy 5: Yeah.
 Boy 3: I think he sort of, right from the start, thinks that it's not something worth listening to, so he didn't really... He just thought that it was something stupid.

Girl 2 sought an entry point when querying the boy's use of the word '*know*' but this opportunity was overlooked and instead the teacher chose to praise Boy 2's contribution. A further opportunity to bring the girls into the discussion occurred when the teacher asked: 'Does anyone agree, disagree, think something different?', but again the opportunity is missed when the teacher fails to signal for a girl to respond, and a boy seizes the moment. Participation in this discussion is determined by boys' assertiveness to take the turn as the number of consecutive exchanges between boys and the teacher demonstrate. Conversely, girls appear to be silenced by their adherence to rules of social conduct which oblige them to be good listeners and to wait for their turn to be signalled. Alternatively, the girls' silence may be a discursive position that involves them choosing not to play the power game.

Despite the interview claims by the girls that gender loyalty was a 'boy practice', they too sometimes fell into this pattern, responding to one another in ways that allowed them to dominate the linguistic space. However, at no point when girls were controlling the discussion was the teacher observed to be complicit in allowing this to occur, as was evidenced when boys were doing so. When boys sought to join in, they were encouraged, whereas girls were frequently side-lined in favour of the boys' participation.

What is evident from the analysis of the discussions is that by the time girls reach secondary school they generally feel more confident in claiming the linguistic space than was evidenced in the primary discussions. The enactment of gender equity policies that primary teachers frequently referred to in their interviews in the previous study (Godinho & Shrimpton, 2003), may well have raised student consciousness of their power to resist conventional gendered behaviour.

Teacher Discourses

In the majority of discussions, a teacher-centric discourse was noticeable, with teachers generating the discussion questions and determining what would be discussed and by whom, as previous extracts in this paper have shown. As one teacher summarised:

I don't feel like using the word 'director' but that's what I feel like I am, but I don't...and I want to feel conscious about not putting words into their mouths. I want them to kind of get it ...and to come to some understanding of what we're doing themselves. I mean, I don't mind helping and pushing them along a little bit basically. (Government School 1, Discussion 2).

The notion of dialectics — the construction of meaning through logical argument — was not widely evidenced. For a notable number of teachers, the focus was on keeping the boys engaged, by privileging their position within the discussion, as previous noted. Teachers often appeared unaware of the slippage of the girls' participation and were seemingly unwilling to challenge the boys' showmanship and their level of participation, often being satisfied with seemingly undeveloped responses. Perhaps this was due to an underlying uneasiness that transferred from a whole class discussion where an aggressive, hegemonic masculine discourse sometimes prevails and impacts on student interactions, which this comment made during the interview following her discussion reveals.

They just sit there arms folded, body leaning back on chair with their legs stretched out and look at you like "Yeah, whatever", that kind of thing. So I think that does have some impact on the kids with less confidence. I'd say that most of the boys have intimidating body language. (Government School 1, Teacher Interview 2)

Such manifestations of power, when left unchallenged put many students at risk – girls and boys alike. The teacher centric discourses so frequently evidenced in this study suggest the need for teachers to be familiarized with the different roles they can play to

assist students to explore their thinking through talk and to engage in powerfully literate ways.

In two groups where a community of inquiry discourse (Lipman, 1988; Splitter & Sharp, 1995, Cam, 2006) was enacted, the discourse analysis revealed that this approach impacted significantly on the students' use of the interactive discussion space, despite the teachers keeping actively within the discussion process. In these groups, understandings, such as inclusiveness, respect, honesty, trust, consideration of different possibilities and open-mindedness, were flagged at the beginning of the discussion. As one of the teachers inferred, control of the linguistic space in a community of inquiry was both the responsibility of the group and of the individual:

I think it's a matter of encouraging students. So yes there is a domination sometimes by boys but it can also be that the girls can dominate the discussion if the expectations or as one of my classes call it, the group understandings are not laid out... They don't like the idea of rules. The group understandings are laid out and then it also becomes, eventually, the role of the community to say: 'Look, you're talking too much', you know, or 'You keep interrupting me, can you not do that?' (Government School 1, Teacher Interview 3).

Interestingly, in one of the group discussions when the girls had been holding the floor for some time this teacher intervened to create spaces for the boys to re-enter the discussion – a concession rarely afforded to the girls in other discussions when the boys had control. However, girls in both the inquiry groups acknowledged in the interviews that boys often took over in their other classes.

After reading of *The Rabbits* by Sean Tan and John Marsden, the aforementioned teacher scaffolded the students' posing of questions to guide the discussion process. The agency afforded to these students impacted on the groups' discursive practices as the student dialogue that develops around the big open-ended question, 'What is culture?' illustrates.

- Boy 1: Culture is practically everything. It's the countries' personal traditions, like their beliefs and what they do and stuff.
- Teacher: It's traditions, beliefs, what they do. I might need you to be a bit more specific but well let's go to (boy's name) first.
- Boy 2: I think culture is society's traditions, beliefs, rights, rituals, rules—like places they live in—the way they exist with one another. <highly animated expression>
- Girl 1: Basically the people themselves.
- Girl 2: What they are.
- Boy 2: Yes, what they are. Have I said beliefs?
- Teacher: Yes you have.

Boy 1: It's practically like the shin bone of how they live and the way they live.
Teacher: In using the metaphor, shin bone what do you actually mean?
Boy 1: Well uh – it's kind of like their lives. Culture is their lives.
Boy 3: Without culture you'd be the same as everyone else.
Boy 2: It's individuality and your shin bone is what keeps you together so you don't fall over ,<leans to one side to demonstrate>. And also it's your weak spot. And if you hit the culture everything else falls down. Like, if you kick some one in the shin they fall down.
Teacher: Can anyone give an example of culture being a weak spot?
Girl 2: When the Europeans came to Australia they didn't even try to understand the Aborigines' culture, or even talk to the people – they disregarded it. Well you know we don't know your culture so we'll live by ours....

In this rich excerpt, there is a profound sense of students building collaboratively on one another's responses to address the complexity of the question and to construct a considered response, in particular Boy 2's fleshing out of the shin bone metaphor Boy 1 uses to depict culture. However, while students are clearly eager to speak they also create spaces for one another so there is a sense of joint construction, albeit the girls abiding by social expectations and waiting patiently for their moment to enter the discussion. The idea of using a metaphor in this way demonstrates the risk taking that can occur when students feel they are in a safe place where an individual's ideas are respected. The teacher does not insist on all responses being directed through her, but steps in and out of the dialogue to keep the discussion focused as she cogently demonstrates when asking what Boy 1 means by describing culture as a shinbone, and then by asking for an example of culture being a weak spot. These probes sustain the question and strengthen the discussion immeasurably by deepening the students' thinking. At no point is a cognitive take over attempted through expert talk, instead the focus is on students exploring their thinking through dialogic talk. While the visual images of the videotaped discussion reveal the sense of community that is operative, the verbal text reveals the inquiry approach that is unfolding within the discursive practices.

Conclusion

The secondary teachers' challenge that the findings from the primary school research were not transferable to secondary schools was partially upheld. The quantitative data analysis showed girls at the secondary level were generally more assertive in taking up the linguistic space in the small-group teacher-facilitated discussions. Yet the very marginal difference is not suggestive of girls 'blabbing on' and taking over the talk. The discourse analysis affirmed claims made in the interviews about boys' behaviours silencing the girls, but the discourses that were identified in the analyses of the discussions were not generalisable, but particular to some boys in some groups.

The quantitative findings provided a snapshot of talk patterns that did not depict an accurate portrayal of what was happening at the micro level with the take up of linguistic space within the individual group discussions. It was the discourse analyses that identified binaries that categorized some behaviours according to gendered alignment, such as girls assuming the position of the good listener with fine tuned interpersonal skills who wait their turn and position themselves according to the social expectations (Jenkins & Cheshire 1990; Reay 1991; Sadker & Sadker (1994), and the competitive, authoritative positioning of the boys (Baxter, 2002). However, it was more often the case that discourses could not be dichotomized and were contingent upon the communities in which students interacted and the social capital — norms of reciprocity and trust — the students possessed as a group.

Importantly, the study has identified the need for more awareness of how power operates through discursive positioning and the importance of 'developing a sense of the value of one's own linguistic products [which] is a fundamental dimension of the sense of knowing the place which one occupies in the social space' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 82), a point taken up by the 'the understandings' the community of inquiry groups establish. While this paper has highlighted some of the more subtle ways that both girls and boys can be silenced and/or marginalized through linguistic exchanges and power relations that operate within and beyond the classroom (Reay, 1999; Apple, 2006), it has also shown that 'silences while inherited, are not immutable (Britzman, 2003, p. 40). The findings have also indicated the need for teachers to be more aware of the roles they can

play in enhancing the social capital in small-group discussions so that their discursive practices engender more productive student interactions.

Of particular concern was the revelation by secondary students that they seldom work in teacher facilitated small-groups. Despite comments by the majority of students about how much they enjoyed this way of working and how productive they found it, the small-group construct was a novelty. This finding is consistent with comments by pre-service teachers at the University of Melbourne in the Diploma of Education course who say that in secondary schools small-group work is infrequently used and thus students do not have the necessary social capital to work effectively as a group. Importantly, the small-group teacher facilitated structure moderated some behaviours that the students insist occur in their whole class discussions. In light of students' interview comments, and some of the male hegemonic discourses observed in this study there appears to be a real need for closer surveillance of what is happening in whole class discussion, particularly given the central role that discussion plays within the enactment of rich curriculum.

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